

FRIEZE

Work in Progress: Akinsanya Kambon

The former marine, Black Panther, professor and artist 'allows the spirits to guide his hands' in the creation of his ceramics for Frieze New York

+2 BY AKINSANYA KAMBON AND LIVIA RUSSELL IN FRIEZE NEW YORK, INTERVIEWS | 08 APR 26



Akinsanya Kambon (born Mark Teemer) spent 1970 on death row, arrested in connection to the Oak Park Four shooting in Sacramento, California. He had previously worked in Vietnam as a combat illustrator with the US Marines, then as a lieutenant of culture in the Sacramento chapter of the Black Panther Party. On his acquittal, Kambon enrolled in Sacramento City College, where he began working in ceramics.

Taking the shape of figures, vessels, plaques and drums, Kambon's pieces embody stories of violence and resistance that are 'being erased from history'. Throughout his career as an artist and educator, he has been fuelled by his need to discover and communicate the truth about a history of slavery in the United States that he was not told about when growing up. With fractured metallic lustres, Kambon's ceramics bear the scars of their raku firing and of his own survival.

As Kambon prepares to show his work in a solo presentation with Ortuzar and Marc Selwyn at Frieze New York, and in anticipation of his major exhibition, 'Soul Sessions' at the Center for Art, Research and Alliances, and SculptureCenter, New York, he reflects on his pursuit of truth.

Livia Russell Tell me about your work for Frieze New York.

Akinsanya Kambon It will be a show of ceramic sculptures that talk about the Pan-African struggle in the world. People don't realize that we've been in this fight since the 14th century, even if I've only been in it since the 1960s. Among the bronze plaques I'm showing will be one of the Oba of Benin and the Queen Mother of Benin. The Oba's crown is decorated with the heads of Christian and Muslim slavers.

Right now, in this country, they are trying to write slavery out of history. But it's too late for that. Young people already know what happened here. Artists have to be honest. They have to come with the truth with a capital T and justice with a capital J. This puts a lot of responsibility on us. You've got to do your research.

In the work I do, I try to bring out the parts of history that nobody talks about. Like how Wall Street was one of the first slave markets in this country. The ships docked right across the street from a market where African people were sold as livestock.



Akinsanya Kambon, *Oba of Benin with Slavers decorating Crown*, 2022/23. Bronze, 48 x 51 x 13 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Marc Selwyn Fine Art, and Ortuzar. Photo: Paul Salvesson

If you talk about what happened, you're going to have to come correct. And we artists *really* have to come correct. I was at an exhibition last week, and there was a mural which featured George Jackson, his hands in the air as he was shot in San Quentin prison [in 1971]. Painted above his head was an 8mm pistol. I looked at it, and I thought: What the hell is this? This is perpetuating the propaganda that COINTELPRO put out – that Jackson smuggled a gun into the prison in his afro. It's a lie. You can't smuggle no 8mm pistol in your hair. That's how they justified killing Jackson. Yes, he did run out into the prison yard, but if you've smuggled a gun into prison, how come, out of the guards that were killed, none were shot?

This is what I'm working on right now – 19 paintings that are trying to show these truths. I'm correcting the history of the Alamo, Custer's Last Stand, the lynching of John Brown and more.



Still from *Akinsanya Kambon: The Hero Avenges*, dir. Gabriel Noguez & Sean Rowry, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2026

LR In the Vietnam War, you served as a combat illustrator, and many of the artworks you produced on the frontline were rejected and destroyed for the violent truths they told. Is your work now a response to this manipulation of the truth?

AK Exactly. We try to sugarcoat everything for the people. The officers in Vietnam didn't want anything that was too bloody or made the US Marines look bad. We had a whole lot of good marines, but there were also paedophiles in the Marine Corps. I had a painting of a Marine who raped a five-year-old, then shot her in the head. I don't give a damn how bloody it is. People need to see it. If the American people were able to see the carnage and the blood of war, they would not be so willing to go into conflict.

When I was young, nobody gave us the truth. Like all little boys, I wanted to be a Boy Scout, but my mother didn't want me to join. I didn't realize that the Scouts were just for white boys. When we had our knot class, the instructor showed us how to tie the hangman's noose. I was so proud of my little hangman's noose that when the instructor took me up on stage, I thought he was going to show everybody how well I'd tied my knot. Instead, he took me to the edge of the stage, put his big noose around my neck and kicked me off the four-foot drop. I didn't know about the history of slavery then, and how many lynchings had taken place all across the Southern states and even in the north. My mother knew, but she never told me.

LR How do personal and historical experiences of violence collide in your work?

AK I'm making a series called 'Strange Fruit', which deals with lynchings and castrations. I show people like Emmett Till, a 14-year-old who was murdered in Mississippi. When I created my image of Till, I flashed back to when I was 15, and my aunt showed me a picture of him in *Jet* magazine. I still remember that to this day. It was right before I went to Saint Louis, Missouri, to meet my father for the first time. She was trying to prepare me for the South.



Akinsanya Kambon in his studio, 2024. Photo: Sean Rowry

LR You began working in ceramics at Sacramento City College in 1970, the year you were acquitted and released from death row. What changed for you when you found this means of expression?

AK It's like going up stairs. You start out drawing, then you're painting, then you take another step and you're doing three-dimensional work. Sculpture is the highest pinnacle. I learnt ceramics from Al Bird. The process I use is process called raku. It's a Japanese technique they use for teapots. When you pull them out of the fire, they're red hot, and when they hit cool air, it causes thermal shock, causing fractures in the glaze and the clay. Then you let them smoke. The liquid glaze mingles with the smoke and causes all types of metallic lustres to come into the piece. If you have drummers present, they can drum to call the ancestors' spirits to enter the fire with the work. When you pull them out, you never know what you're going get, but it's always something amazing.

LR Your ceramics often take the shape of *djembes* or 'talking drums'. Why is this form significant?

AK The drum was banned for Africans in America. They wouldn't let us play the drum because they felt that we would use it to communicate and organize, which is true. The 1811 German Coast slave rebellion – which my great-great grandfather was involved in, and for which he and his eldest son were beheaded – on the road to New Orleans, they played the tama drum to call the slaves from the fields and join the march.



Akinsanya Kambon, *Djembe #4*, 2024. Raku fired ceramic, 49 × 41 × 38 cm © Akinsanya Kambon. Courtesy: the artist, Ortuzar and Marc Selwyn Fine Art. Photo: Paul Salveson

LR You work in a studio filled with hundreds of your works. What is it like to make new ceramics in the presence of these powerful forms and histories?

AK I feed off the spirit of every piece in my studio. With each new work, I don't try to control the form that it takes. I allow the spirits to guide my hands. I just work. I love it because when I come out of the zone, I look at the work and I try to figure out what I did. Even if I don't understand it, sometimes somebody will come along and help explain it to me. I like that.



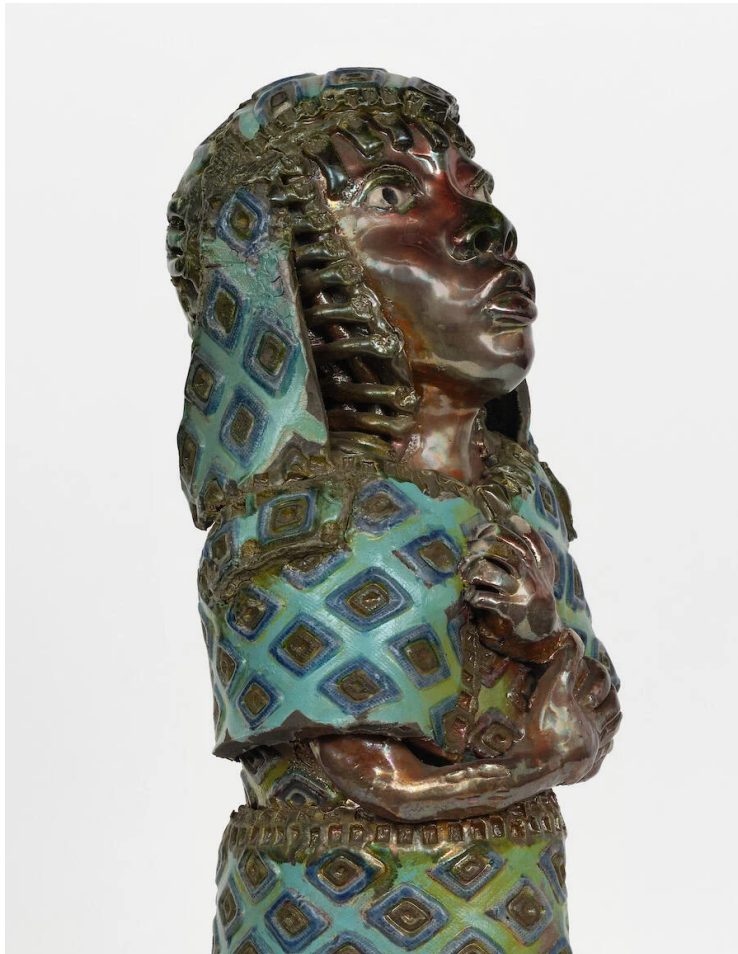
Still from *Akinsanya Kambon: The Hero Avenges*, dir. Gabriel Noguez & Sean Rowry, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2026

AK I made the *Black Panther Coloring Book* in 1968 for grown people like me who were illiterate, so that so they wouldn't grow up like I did, not knowing the history of the slave rebellions. People claimed that my book was put out by the FBI. The FBI didn't put that out. Hell, I put that out, and it wouldn't confuse nobody.

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LR What do you hope that people will take from your work at Frieze New York?

AK I hope that people try to get the truth out of my work. If they have questions, I hope I can answer them, or we can find the answers together. You can find solutions to the problems we have today just by taking a cursory look at history and seeing things that we missed.



Akinsanya Kambon, *Oya - Goddess of The Wind*, 2015. Raku fired ceramic, 55 x 18 x 17 cm. © Akinsanya Kambon. Courtesy: the artist, Ortuzar and Marc Selwyn Fine Art. Photo: Paul Salveson

'Akinsanya Kambon: Soul Sessions', Center for Art, Research and Alliance, and SculptureCenter, New York, 28 May – 16 August 2026.

*Video extracts from **Akinsanya Kambon: The Hero Avenges**, dir. Gabriel Noguez & Sean Rowry, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2026.*

Further Information

Frieze New York, The Shed, 13 – 17 May 2026. Limited full-price tickets are available now – secure yours today. Alternatively, become a member to enjoy priority access, exclusive guided tours and more.